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ABSTRACT

A study investigated how motivational, curricular, and instructional needs of at-risk students were accommodated by an alternative school program located and organized within a conventional high school in northern Louisiana. Data were gathered through documents; classroom observations; and interviews with students, teachers, and the administrator of the alternative school. Findings indicate that behaviors characterizing the at-risk students in the alternative school program resulted from low self-esteem and lack of social skills. An academic program that allowed students to experience success and a counseling program that addressed the specific needs of each student contributed to meeting the motivational needs of the students. Students attending the alternative school were accommodated with a curriculum that allowed them to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. Block scheduling allowed them to earn more credits per year than they could in the conventional program, so they could actually catch up. Vocational training opportunities were provided in addition to the regular curriculum. Because this alternative school was located within a conventional school, students could participate in the elective courses and extracurricular activities offered by the surrounding school. Small class sizes enabled teachers in the alternative school to meet the individual instructional needs of students. (Contains 19 references.) (TD)

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AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL WITHIN A SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY ON MEETING MOTIVATIONAL, CURRICULA, AND INSTRUCTIONAL NEEDS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

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Abstract

The organizational structure and purpose of alternative schools differ according to the needs of students to be served. The purpose of this study was to investigate how motivational, curricula and instructional needs of at-risk students are accommodated by an alternative school program located in north Louisiana and organized within the facilities and programs of a conventional high school. Data were gathered through (a) documents; (b) classroom observations; and (c) interviews with students, teachers, and the administrator of the alternative school. This study found self-esteem to be a significant motivating factor among at-risk students. The self-esteem needs of students are accommodated through opportunities that allow students to experience success. The alternative school curriculum provides at-risk students with vocational training opportunities in addition to meeting the requirements for high school graduation. Small class size enables teachers in the alternative school to meet the individual instructional needs of students.

Introduction

Students who drop out of school represent a potential liability to the social and economic stability of our nation. Hahn (1987) expressed this concern in stating, "Excessively high dropout rates threaten the nation's productivity and represent a tragic waste of young lives" (p. 256). Many alternative school programs have been established nationwide in an effort to address the needs of students at risk of dropping out (Neumann, 1994). According to Neumann, "There is no typical model of an alternative school" (p. 549). Alternative schools have been developed and organized according to different philosophies and thus differ in their purposes. Smith, Gregory, and Pugh (1981), in a study that compared the success in which alternative schools and conventional schools meet the needs of students, described the seven alternative schools in their study as representing "quite different ideologies" (p. 562). Behavior modification programs and vocational preparation programs characterize some alternative schools. Other alternative schools have implemented innovative curricula and instructional programs. Neumann suggests that the direction of the alternative education movement is toward "the promotion of a system of diversified education" (p. 549).

Raywid (1994) classified alternative schools into three types based upon their purpose. "Popular Innovations" or "Type I" alternative schools are characterized by innovative programs that seek to make school challenging and more fulfilling. These alternative schools depart from the organizational structure and administration that characterize conventional schools. As opposed to mandatory attendance, students choose to attend these alternative schools. "Last-Chance Programs" or "Type II" alternative schools focus on modifying the behavior of students who have been suspended or face possible expulsion, and students have no choice in attending these schools. "Remedial Focus" or "Type III" alternative schools provide academic, social, and

emotional remediation or rehabilitation to at-risk students. These schools serve as a temporary placement until students have received remedial services and are capable of returning to the mainstream programs.

"Type II" and "Type III" alternative schools are designed to "fix the student" and have been relatively unsuccessful in their purpose (Raywid, 1994). These "fix the student" approaches fail in meeting the needs of at-risk students over prolonged periods and students typically revert to the behaviors that characterize them as at-risk. "Type I" alternative schools are designed to change the student's environment and have demonstrated sustained improvement in student attitudes, behavior, and achievement. Successful programs result from transformative change in both instruction and school organization. According to Raywid, "A good alternative school represents a carefully built community, an engaging instructional program, and a synchronized set of organizational arrangements" (p. 30).

Most parents, students, teachers, and administrators will agree that the purpose of schools is to meet student needs. Like conventional ones, alternative schools are established for the purpose of meeting the needs of students they serve. According to Souza (1999), "Alternative schools are distinguished from their conventional counterparts because they are generally designed to serve an at-risk target population" (p. 92). Because these schools serve a student population at risk of dropping out of school, they must attend to the differing needs of these students.

What are the specific needs of students that are at risk of dropping out of school? Research has identified common responses from dropouts as to the reasons why students choose to drop out of school. Poor academic performance, financial restraints, teenage pregnancy, and discipline problems are frequently cited as reasons why students drop out of school (Hahn, 1987;

Barber & McClellan, 1987). According to Hahn, disadvantaged students are more likely to drop out of school than are advantaged students. The number of students leaving school increases proportionally with the number of students classified as poor.

Hahn (1987) cites poor academic performance as the most common reason why students leave school. Because of poor academic performance, students are retained in grade levels and find themselves older than their classmates. Overage students are 7% to 10% more likely to drop out of school. He characterizes these students in the following:

> Many of the students retained have low opinions of themselves, and they appear to have fewer friends than students who have been promoted. The blow to student self-esteem caused by school retention policies appears to be so severe as to cancel the positive effects of good reading skills. Flunking a grade in school has multiple effects. Students who have been held back a grade are up to four times more likely to drop out than those who have never been held back. (p. 259)

In order for alternative schools to meet students' needs, they must first begin with a clearly defined definition of those needs. Smith et al. (1981) cites Maslow's hierarchy of needs as the most appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the complexities of the human body and mind. Maslow prioritized human needs believing that the most basic needs, at the bottom of the hierarchy, must be satisfied before the next level can be addressed. Needs occupying a higher level of the hierarchy become motivators of behavior when needs at lower levels of the hierarchy have been satisfied (Maslow, 1987).

Physiological needs, or factors necessary for biological existence, are the most basic ones. When physiological needs are gratified, the need for safety, security, and structure quickly follows as the strongest motivator of behavior. Satisfaction of social needs, involving feelings

of love, affection, and a sense of belonging surge within humans as they hunger for relationships and tire of the alienation and loneliness that exists without them. Esteem needs replace social needs and urges individuals to find confidence and self-worth. The deprivation of achievement, mastery, and competence produces feelings of inferiority, weakness, and helplessness. Maslow's culminating point is self-actualization, the level motivated by desires for self-fulfillment and realizing one's full potential. The theorist purports that all human behavior is motivated by desires to obtain these needs until they are satisfied (Maslow, 1987).

As previously noted, Smith et al. (1981) used Maslow's hierarchy of needs to compare the success of alternative schools and conventional schools in meeting the needs of students. The researchers developed and used an instrument, *Statements About School* (SAS), to assess teacher and student perceptions of how well a school was satisfying student needs. Researchers found that alternative schools were perceived to be more successful than conventional schools in meeting students' needs. The greatest disparity resulted in students' perceptions of schools, with alternative schools achieving higher mean scores on the assessment for meeting security, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs of students.

In addition to meeting the motivational needs of at-risk students, alternative schools should be organized to accommodate the curricula and instructional needs of students. According to Hahn (1987), successful dropout prevention programs require a cohesive, integrated effort that combines several components. Successful alternative programs identified in research literature share common structures and processes.

Research overwhelmingly supports small class size as a criterion for the organization of alternative schools (Black, 1997; Castleberry & Enger, 1998; McPartland, Jordan, Legters, & Balfanz, 1997; Neumann, 1994; Secada, 1999; Souza, 1992). Peterson, Bennet, and Sherman

(1991) interviewed teachers of at-risk students and identified successful practices. Teachers interviewed in the study indicated that smaller classes allow teachers to provide at-risk students with more attention and recognition. Larger classes limit the teacher's ability to monitor and provide students with the help they need. Peterson et al. concluded, "Students need fairly constant attention to participation and success. Groups larger than perhaps twelve present difficulties for monitoring, instructing, acknowledging, and communicating" (p. 186).

Castleberry and Enger (1998) reported student perceptions of successful practices in Arkansas' Alternative Learning Environments. Students reported one-on-one instruction, ability to concentrate, and an opportunity to be known by teachers as benefits of small classes. Cancro (1983) also found small class size to be a contributing factor in the success of students attending the New York School for the Deaf. "Limiting each teacher to a small number of students allows the teacher to better understand the learning patterns and capabilities of each youngster" (p. 87).

Duke and Griesdon (1999) substantiate evidence that small class size is beneficial to the success of students attending alternative schools. "Most alternative schools are intentionally small so that students can have a personalized environment and close supervision" (p.90). However, they cautioned educators of the possible limits resulting when alternative schools are organized to accommodate small numbers of students. Scheduling to obtain small student-teacher ratios is expensive and course offerings tend to be limited.

Successful alternative schools demonstrate innovation in their curricula and instructional programs. Raywid (1994) advised educators to carefully consider the desired purpose and outcomes of the alternative program prior to organizing and implementing specific strategies. Anglin (1979) also emphasized the significance of the organizational aspects of schooling as a variable of potential importance to curriculum and instruction. According to Anglin:

> The instructional role of the teacher can be analyzed with specificity if it is addressed in relation to the educational environment as characterized by the school organization. This idea stems from the assumption that much of what is commonly labeled as teaching is multi-dimensional and phenomenological and is therefore, affected and mediated by the environment in which it occurs. (p. 439)

Gregg (1999) summarized research findings on suggested curricula and instructional programs for inclusion in alternative schools. Alternative schools designed to "fix the environment" of at-risk students should implement curricula and instructional programs that are engaging, challenging, and relevant. Multi-disciplinary programs that address the academic, social, and behavioral needs of students are recommended. The curriculum should be integrated across disciplines and include vocational, career, and community service components. Students are offered a full curriculum that meets state graduation requirements. Instruction that best serves at-risk students addresses individual learning styles and achievement levels. Students need to experience frequent and continuous success.

Different curricula and instructional programs are needed in alternative schools designed with the purpose of "fixing the student." A modified curriculum emphasizing the basics and meeting individual needs is preferred over a curriculum focusing on academics and offering electives. Programs focus on rehabilitating or remediating the behaviors that contributed to the "sentencing" of students to these schools. Students may be afforded the option of pursuing a high school diploma, but it is suggested that alternative diplomas guide the curriculum. Instructional approaches provide drill and skill development (Gregg, 1999).

Peterson et al. (1991) found that successful teachers of at-risk students provide academic activities that are tied to the needs and interests of students. Curricula and instructional programs

found common among successful teachers of at-risk students "range from clear, direct instruction to sophisticated role-playing in simulations. Goals include basic skills, social learnings, and high-level cognitive outcomes" (p. 181). Although strong academic programs are evident among successful teachers of at-risk students, teachers frequently interrupt the academic program to respond to student problems. Peterson et al. also found that teachers push students in tasks that they can experience success. "Success is made visible, acknowledged, and related to subsequent learning. The emphasis is on progress, not on normative comparisons or absolute performances" (p. 183). Successful teachers of at-risk students coach their students on social skills, personal behavior, and on how to solve problems.

Rutherford and Quinn (1999) advocate direct instruction as an effective instructional strategy to use in alternative settings. With this method, content is covered extensively and students are questioned at low cognitive levels to provide many opportunities for correct responses. Student performance is monitored and immediate feedback is provided. Rutherford and Quinn also recommend instruction that incorporates behavior analysis and modification strategies.

The diversification of alternative schools in their curricular and instructional programs challenges research efforts that attempt to generalize common characteristics among successful schools. Because alternative schools are designed to serve a specific population of at-risk students and are unique in the programs they offer, they can be more effectively understood if studied in the context within which they operate.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined the organizational structure and programs offered by an alternative school located in north Louisiana. The alternative school is unique in that the school is organized and operates within the facilities and programs of a conventional high school (i.e. school-within-a-school). A qualitative case study was conducted to investigate the specific programs implemented by the alternative school and determine how the programs are designed to meet the motivational, curricula, and instructional needs of the at-risk students it serves. Because this alternative school has been recognized for its success, the information obtained from this study will facilitate an understanding of the programs that successfully meet the needs of at-risk students and provide a model for other schools and school districts to follow.

Research Question

With the stated purpose in mind, this case study was guided by the following three research questions:

Question 1: What are the specific motivational needs of at-risks students enrolled in the alternative school and how does the organizational structure of the program accommodate these needs?

Question 2: What are the specific curricula needs of at-risk students enrolled in the alternative school and how does the organizational structure of the program accommodate these needs?

Question 3: What are the specific instructional needs of at-risk students enrolled in the alternative school and how does the organizational structure of the program accommodate these needs?

Methodology

Research Setting

High-school dropout rates are of significant interest in the state of Louisiana, a state noted for its weak academic performance (Andrews & Fayissa, 1991) and plagued by high rates of teenage pregnancy, unemployment, poverty, and illiteracy. Eighty-six percent of youth in Louisiana attend public schools: 51% are European American and 46% are African American. According to the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals Office of Public Health (1999), Louisiana had the highest teen dropout rate in the country, with 12,000 adolescents dropping out of school in 1994. Louisiana has led the nation in the number of single-parent families and number of children living in poverty. Thirty-two percent of all children in Louisiana and half of all African American children live in poverty. Louisiana ranks high among other states in percentage of births to teens.

This study was conducted in a public high school in north Louisiana that serves students in grades 9-12. The school has a student population of 1,500 students: 52% of the population are European Americans and 48% are African Americans. Approximately 48% of the student body qualify for free or reduced meals. The student population of this high school is very representative of the population of public school students in the state of Louisiana.

The alternative school, implemented at the start of the 1998/1999 school year, is an alternative school functioning within the facilities of a conventional public high school. Students within the conventional high school considered to be at risk of dropping out of school or repeatedly violating conventional school behavior codes are identified and allowed to participate in the program by choice. Students will remain in the alternative program until they earn the required Carnegie units to receive a high school diploma.

The alternative school has five teachers and an administrator/counselor that serve a population of 75 students. Seventy-five percent of these students are African American and twenty-five percent are European American students. Five classrooms and an administrative office, within close proximity to each other, are provided within the conventional school. The students in the alternative school share facilities and programs with students in the conventional high school. These students socialize and interact with students in the regular high school program.

Participants

Interviews were conducted with students, teachers, and the administrator of the alternative school. Participants in these interviews included the administrator of the alternative school, who also serves as the school's counselor. This administrator designed the alternative school program and provided an informed description of the program's components, goals, and objectives. Three interviews were conducted with students enrolled in the alternative school. Two white male students and a black female student volunteered to participate in the interviews. The female student (Student A) had been in the alternative school program since it was implemented in the fall of 1998. One of the male students (Student B) entered the alternative program in January of 1999 and the other male student (Student C) in January of 2000.

Classroom observations were conducted and teachers of these classes were interviewed. Two teachers and the students attending class participated in these observations. Teacher A teaches the Career Technology Lab and five students were present on the day of the observation. Teacher B teaches Algebra I in the alternative school and 12 students were present on the day of the observation. In addition to these observations, a third teacher (Teacher C) was interviewed.

Data Collection Procedures

Data for this study were collected over a three-week time period and included 15 total hours of classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. Four interviews were conducted with the program administrator. The initial interview with the program director was unstructured because my purpose was to obtain a general overview of the alternative school program. The remaining three interviews with the program director were semi-structured in that I had prepared a general interview guide for each interview to explore aspects of the program that were emerging from other data sources. These questions focused on more specific aspects of the alternative school's programs.

Three student interviews were conducted using a general interview guide. These questions were generated to obtain student perspectives and extract additional information regarding the curricula and instructional programs of the alternative school. By observing the two classrooms, I was able to document teacher/student interactions, both verbal and nonverbal, as well as practical applications of the alternative school's programs. Descriptive documentation of classroom observation and interview data was recorded in a field notebook.

The program administrator provided two documents that served as additional data sources for the study. Financial support for initial implementation of the alternative school program was provided by grant funds. The grant proposal provided a comprehensive description of the program. A brief summary of the alternative school, prepared jointly by the principal of the high school in which the alternative school is housed and the program administrator, provided another data source for the study.

Data Analysis

The data sources from this study included: (a) two classroom observations, (b) four interviews with the program administrator, (c) three interviews with students in the program, (d) interviews with three teachers, and (e) two document sources. In analyzing the data, I was looking for textual information concerning the curriculum and instructional goals of the alternative school program and specific motivational needs associated with at-risk students enrolled in the program. The content of each data set was read several times in search of common themes. Common themes emerged for each of the different data sources. A distinctive group of themes emerged from the interviews with the program administrator as they did for the two classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student interviews.

After identifying common themes for each data source, every statement included in a set of transcribed notes was coded according to the theme/s supported by the statement. The process resulted in a set of categorical themes for the interviews with the program administrator, a set of categorical themes for the classroom observations, and a set of themes for the student and teacher interviews. The data sets from these sources were coded according to these categorical themes. Data from each source were compiled according to the identified themes. Analysis of documents was conducted in the same manner.

Results

Research Question One

What are the specific motivational needs of the at-risk students enrolled in the alternative school and how does the organizational structure of the program accommodate these needs?

Assertion One: Behaviors characterizing the at-risk students in the alternative school program result from low self-esteem and lack of social skills.

Low self-esteem is perpetuated by, and contributes to, the continued failure experienced by at-risk students in the conventional high school program. Most of the students enrolled in the alternative school are one or two years behind in their academic program due to failure of courses in the conventional high school curriculum. Those students further behind in their coursework are given priority for enrollment into the alternative school program. During one of the interviews with the program administrator, I asked what single most significant factor causes students in the alternative program to be unsuccessful in the conventional high school program. The administrator replied, "The majority of the kids have low self-esteem. When these kids continuously fail in the traditional high school classes, their self-esteem continues to lower and continues to lower as they continue to experience failure. They keep sinking lower and lower as they experience failure over and over."

The implications of low self-esteem for these at-risk students can be observed in the academic behaviors in which they demonstrate. Low self-esteem generates feelings of inferiority when at-risk students continue to fail at performing tasks in which their peers are performing. They began to feel less than normal and after repeated efforts fail, the at-risk student becomes convinced that he or she cannot perform the tasks and will eventually stop trying. When at-risk students become convinced they cannot pass the courses in the conventional high school, they tend to drop out or cause discipline problems. The behavioral problems observed of at-risk students support the assertion that students' social needs are deprived. According to the program administrator, "The kids in the alternative program are always the ones that get into trouble. The average kid in this program was being written up three times per week during the initial year of

the program. Now, during the second year of the program, it is unusual to get five write-ups per week among all the alternative school students."

In reflecting on their experiences in the conventional high school program, each of the three students interviewed described feelings characteristic of low self-esteem. I asked each student how their feelings about themselves had changed since they were now enrolled in the alternative school program.

Student A: "They bring you up and make you feel better. They say, 'you can do it. We're not going to let you fail.' The teachers make me feel like somebody."

Student B: "There are a whole lot of differences. The people I talk to are different. I used to talk to nobody. The way that I approach things is different. My grades have improved. I am more open now than I was before. At first, I was afraid to talk to teachers."

Student C: "It brings out your personality. You feel more comfortable and can be yourself."

Although none of these students explicitly state they had low self-esteem while in the conventional high school program or high esteem now that they are in the alternative school, their comments clearly demonstrate the differences they perceive in themselves now that they are enrolled in the program.

Assertion Two: An academic program that allows students to experience success and a counseling program that addresses the specific needs of each student contribute in meeting the motivational needs of the students.

Meeting motivational needs of at-risk students attending the alternative school involves methods and programs that serve to increase students' self-esteem. During an interview with the

program administrator, I asked how the alternative school improves the self-esteem of the students enrolled in the program. "The way we do it is by finding something where they will succeed. We build upon their good so they can be successful. We will give them something positive. We say good things that are positive. If they experience success in anything, the rest is easy. Everything else falls into place."

During both classroom observations, teachers provided opportunities for students to experience success and recognized students for correct answers and effort. Both teachers provided frequent encouragement and positive feedback to students. Teacher A taught the Career Technology Lab where students completed exercises from modules at computer stations. After completing exercises from the module, students were given a quiz over the module lesson. Teacher A immediately determined the problems answered incorrectly by the student and allowed them to make necessary corrections. Teacher A explained, "I do not allow them to fail the test. I let them retake the test until they achieve a certain percentage. This way, students don't fail. They succeed and feel good about themselves. When they feel good about themselves, they will work."

Teacher B also provided the students in Algebra I class with opportunities to experience success. On the day in which I observed Teacher B, students were given what was referred to as a "practice test." Teacher B explained to the students that anyone making an "A" on the practice test would not be required to re-test the following day on the same material. Prior to testing students, Teacher B explained the rules necessary for working problems on the test and left these rules in view while students tested. As students finished their test, Teacher B immediately graded their papers and called upon each student to clarify any misunderstandings demonstrated

on the test. Teacher B praised students who did well on the test and encouraged others to do better the following day when they re-tested.

The counseling program implemented by the alternative school is designed to accommodate the special problems of students at the alternative school. According to the program administrator, "I think the counseling program is the most important part of this program." Counselors from a local university volunteer their services to the alternative school. Each student in the alternative school is assigned a counselor and meets weekly with the counselor. The counselor talks to the student about problems they encounter. In addition to these individual meetings, group therapy sessions are held to address specific needs. Group therapy sessions address social problems such as chemical abuse, anger management, and teenage pregnancy. The goal of the counseling program is to provide students with guidance in dealing with their problems in an effort to improve their social skills and behavior. According to the program administrator, many of the students in the alternative program are academically behind due to societal problems and "there is a social link to the adverse behaviors they demonstrate."

The counseling program also serves a significant function in the discipline program implemented at the alternative program. Traditional discipline methods, that administer punitive consequences for inappropriate behavior, are unsuccessful in deterring undesirable behavior. Any success resulting from these methods are usually temporary. Counselors educate students on alternative approaches for handling specific situations. The goal is to change students' reactions to dilemmas by changing their reasoning of the situation. By teaching students how to make better decisions and solve problems, behavior can be permanently modified.

Research Question Two

What are the specific curricula needs of the at-risk students enrolled in the alternative school and how does the organizational structure of the program accommodate these needs?

Assertion: At-risk students attending the alternative school are accommodated with a curriculum that allows them to complete the requirements for a high school diploma.

The alternative school is designed to accommodate approximately 100 students. The target population is students who have already dropped out of the conventional high school that houses the program. Also targeted are those students from the conventional high school that are two or more years behind in their academic coursework. Priority is given to those students who have accumulated few or no credits toward graduation. Students are recruited for participation in the program but admitted on a voluntary basis. Students enrolled in the program are encouraged to remain in the program until they graduate with a high school diploma.

All students in the alternative school pursue a regular high school diploma as opposed to a high school equivalency diploma. As required by the Louisiana State Department of Education, students must successfully complete a minimum of 23 Carnegie units to receive a high school diploma. The State Department of Education specifies fifteen of these 23 units. The remaining eight units are electives and can be chosen by the student. In addition to earning the required Carnegie units, students must successfully pass the Graduation Exit Examinations in English, Math, Science, and Social Studies.

Courses in the alternative school are arranged on a block schedule that allows students to earn eight units per year as opposed to the six units earned in the conventional high school program. This schedule allows students to take more courses during the year and "catch up" on the credits they failed to earn while enrolled in the conventional school program.

Students in the alternative school earn elective units from a variety of course offerings. All students in the alternative school are required to take, as one of their electives, the Career Technology Lab. This class allows students an opportunity to explore possible career opportunities. Students can also earn elective credit by participating in the Jobs for American Graduates (JAG) program, which provides instruction on the responsibilities of employment. Students learn to write resumes, practice interviewing, and visit places for potential employment. Another elective course available for students in the alternative school is Job Skills For Life. Students are employed and work two to four hours per day after school. Students receive elective credit for their work instead of wages. Some of the students attend a local vocational technical school during part of the school day and earn elective credits toward graduation as well as receiving credit at the technical school.

A major advantage of the organizational structure of the alternative school is that students have an opportunity to earn elective credits offered by the conventional high school. Students can earn elective credit in Band, Choral Music, Home Economics, Art, or other elective courses offered by the conventional high school that houses the program. Students are also able to participate in the extracurricular activities offered by the conventional school and have access to the library, cafeteria, and other facilities within the school.

Research Question Three

What are the specific instructional needs of at-risk students enrolled in the alternative school and how does the organizational structure of the program accommodate these needs?

Assertion: Small class size allows teachers to accommodate the individual learning needs of at-risk students.

The maximum number of students scheduled for classes in the alternative school is 15. Teacher A had five students present in class when observed and Teacher B had 12 students present when observed. Both teachers were able to address the individual needs of students in these small classes. The most convincing evidence supporting the advantage of small class size in benefiting the instructional setting emerged from student interviews. Each student clearly and profoundly acknowledged that small class size made a considerable difference in his or her school experience. Following are the remarks made by each student when asked what was most different about classes taken in the alternative school that contributed to their improved performance.

Student A: "The teacher started explaining the work better. She'll come help you individually if you didn't understand. The teacher breaks down the information. They go real fast in the regular classes. There are more students in class. You must wait for your time to come. Like Teacher B, the teacher tells me how to do it. If I don't get it, the teacher will take me step by step. In the regular school, they throw it at you like it's supposed to be hard. Teacher B breaks it down to me."

Student B: "There were fewer students in the classroom. The teacher worked one-on-one with the students. And it was a little slower paced. Just the environment in the classroom was different. There are more distractions in larger classes. They break it down a little more for you. Like in Algebra I, they may work a couple of problems on the board. They spend about five minutes on a topic (referring to the regular Algebra I class). In the alternative school, they show you short cuts. They keep on and on until you get it."

Student C: "They have time to sit down with you and explain it. In the other classes (referring to classes taken in the conventional school), they have so many students they don't have time to sit down with you. In the alternative classes, I ask questions. The teachers have more time to help us. In the regular class, I was kind of scared to ask questions."

Teachers also agreed that small class size accommodates the instructional needs of at-risk students. Teacher B replied, "Class size is the most significant accommodation because you can give more individual attention to the students. You are able to recognize individual differences and accommodate these differences when there are fewer students in the class. When you can recognize individual differences, it is much easier to modify instruction accordingly."

Teacher C compared the instructional strategies used in conventional high school classes with those used in the alternative school classes. "You do a lot of monitoring and adjustment. The concepts must be applicable to their lives. In the traditional classes, you can present students with the product and they will figure out a process for obtaining the product. In the alternative classes, you must focus more on the process than the product. Once you teach them the process, they will amaze you with the product. You have to be very concrete and specific in the directions you give them."

During interviews with students in the alternative school, students were asked to describe differences in the alternative school classes and those in the conventional school. Student C replied, "I guess in there (referring to alternative class) I had more confidence. In there I asked questions. The teacher had more time to help us. In the regular class I was kind of scared to ask questions." Student B indicated that the biggest difference in the classes was size.

Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The results of this case study suggest that low self-esteem contributes to the failure that students continue to experience in the conventional school setting. Continued failure in the conventional school contributes to further deterioration of self-esteem and becomes manifest in the adverse behaviors demonstrated by the students. Efforts to rescue these students from the negative implications of low self-esteem require programs that provide these students with an opportunity to experience success. Without special programs to accommodate their special needs, at-risk students will continue to fail and eventually drop out of school. Educators at all levels should be aware of the impact of low self-esteem on academic performance. Students should be identified at early ages and accommodations made to prevent the negative consequences of low self-esteem.

The academic and behavioral needs of at-risk students can be accommodated through classes containing fewer students. Small class size allows teachers to address individual student needs more effectively. This finding has implications for the consideration of tracking students according to ability groups. Needs for at-risk students can be accommodated in the conventional school setting by placing identified students in small classes and hiring additional personnel to provide this accommodation.

Establishing alternative schools within existing schools will allow school districts to implement programs that accommodate the needs of students with behavioral and academic problems without sacrificing the budget demands for alternative facilities and sites. School districts need not expend their resources on facilities in order to accommodate students with special needs. When housed in the conventional school, alternative education programs and students can benefit from the programs of the conventional school. Alternative programs

operating within the conventional school will also reduce the stigmatization associated with attending alternative schools.

There are many students attending conventional schools with special needs that are being ignored. By simply restructuring the conventional school and providing the additional personnel and programs for accommodating the needs of these students, at-risk students can be accommodated without being placed in an alternative setting.

There is a need to continue monitoring the recently established alternative school within a school. The alternative school in this study has only been in operation for two complete school years. It remains to be seen how significant the program's benefits will prove to be. Little data are available on the academic development resulting from enrollment in the alternative school. Only one student has graduated from the alternative program to date. As the program continues to operate and when data on graduates become available, the overall effectiveness of the program can then be evaluated. Although discipline and behavior problems have already decreased measurably, it remains to be seen what impact this program will actually have on improving students' academic potential for post secondary studies or success as an employee.

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